

---

Bull Yamaguchi Med Sch 49(1-2):1-6, 2002

## Psychological Hardiness, Workplace Stress and Related Stress Reduction Strategies

*Vickie A. Lambert, RN, DNSc, FAAN<sup>1</sup> Professor*

*Clinton E. Lambert, Jr., RN, PhD, CS, FAAN<sup>1</sup> Professor*

*Hiroaki Yamase, RN, MS, PhD Candidate<sup>1</sup> Asslstant Professor*

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Health Sciences Department of Nursing Yamaguchi University School of Medicine Ube, 755-8554

(Received December 21, 2001, revised April 9, 2002)

*Key words:* Hardiness, stress, stress reduction strategies

**Abstract** Contending with stressful situations in the workplace is a common occurrence for all health care providers. Stress has numerous devastating effects on the workplace environment, as well as upon individuals who become victims of stress. However, enhancing psychological hardiness may facilitate an individual's ability to deal with work place stress. Psychological hardiness, a personality style consisting of commitment, control and challenge, encourages human survival and the enrichment of life through development. This article provides an overview of psychological hardiness and work place stress, and proposes strategies that one can use to enhance commitment, control and challenge in an effort to reduce the impact of stress.

### Introduction

At some point during a health care provider's professional educational preparation or career, he or she enrolls in a course or workshop on stress management. Such courses or workshops generally address the physiological effects of stress and how stress can influence one's health and well-being. Stress, according to Lazarus<sup>1</sup>, occurs when the demands that are being placed upon a person tax or exceed available resources as appraised by the individual involved.

When a stressful situation actually occurs, one often forgets all of the knowledge obtained on stress and how to effectively manage it. Such a response is part of being vulnerable like all other living things.

This article presents an overview of the concept of psychological hardiness<sup>2</sup>), how psychological hardiness relates to stress, the impact stress has on the workplace environment and strategies that can be used to contend with the impact of stress.

### Psychological Hardiness

**Definition.** According to Kobasa,<sup>3</sup> psychological hardiness is a composite of commitment, control and challenge. She believed these three components were relevant to the ability to rise to the challenges of the environment and turn stressful life events into opportunities for personal growth and benefit. Lack of these three dimensions of hardiness describes "burnout"<sup>4</sup>).

Kobasa<sup>3</sup>) derived the conceptualization of psychological hardiness from existentialism.

According to existential philosophy, the ultimate aim of human life is "the creation of personal meaning through decision making and action in the continual pursuit of possibilities". Such an approach describes individuals who remain healthy after dealing with high degrees of life stress, manifesting a constellation of attitudes, beliefs and behavioral tendencies that set them apart from those who become ill. Kobasa built on existentialist notions of the strenuousness of authentic living, of competence, appropriate striving and productive orientation, and on the proposition that a person who experiences high degrees of stress without falling ill has a personality structure that differentiates them from persons who become ill under stress.

#### Components of Psychological Hardiness.

The hardy personality style proposed by Kobasa and colleagues<sup>5)</sup> encourages transformational coping, which involves, "an amalgam of cognition, emotion, and action aimed at not only survival, but also the enrichment of life through development (pg.368)." Commitment is a sense of purpose and meaning that is expressed by way of becoming involved in life's events rather than being passively involved. Control is the tendency to believe and act in a way that influences life's events rather than feeling helpless when confronted with adversity. Challenge is the belief that change, instead of stability, is normal and that change is a stimulus to enhance maturity rather than a threat to security.

Commitment, control and challenge have been hypothesized to form a constellation that: a) moderates the effects of stress by changing the perception of the situation, and b) decreases the negative impact of stressful life events by influencing both cognitive appraisal and coping. To feel uninvolved (rather than committed), powerless (rather than in control), and threatened (rather than challenged) is to experience alienation.

A personality composite of commitment, control and challenge, hardiness is directly relevant to health care because it may assist in the determination of: a) who might be inclined to experience illness when en-

countering stressful life events, and b) who might be in need of stress-reduction intervention so as not to succumb to stress-related illness?

#### **Stress in the Workplace**

Without question, working in the health care setting can be very stressful. Stress in the workplace has become of universal concern to all managers and administrators in the health care arena. In some work groups, stress has become epidemic. In the United States, health care professionals, technicians, managers of all sorts, military officers, corporate executives, sports coaches, entertainers, farmers, recreational directors and members of the clergy have been identified as being most prone to workplace stress. By comparison in Japan, health care providers, production factory workers, salesmen, middle managers of enterprises, and educators at all levels have been identified as being most likely to encounter workplace stress<sup>6-8)</sup>. The reason for the differences between Japan and the United States, in regards to work related stress, likely is due to the cultural differences that exist within the work environments. What workers in one country perceive as stressful, workers in the other country may not perceive as stressful. In addition, the role expectations in the respective work settings are likely to differ between the two countries. Unfortunately, limited research and publications exist that compare work stress across cultures within the work environment<sup>9)</sup>.

A stressful workplace becomes a breeding ground for behavioral health problems. Most professional health care providers know at least one friend or colleague who has experienced some type of workplace stress.

Cost Factors Related to Stress. How does workplace stress influence the work setting? What are the cost factors related to stress? Dr. Daniel Dana<sup>10)</sup>, founder and managing director of the Mediation Training Institute International in Overland Park, Kansas, has devised a cost analysis that documents the effect of conflict in the workplace.

While Dr. Dana addressed conflict in his research, one can very easily apply the term "stress" every place he mentions the term, "conflict". Conflict in the workplace creates stress in the workplace and stress in the workplace creates conflict. Dr. Dana has identified eight cost factors to look at when dealing with stress/conflict:

1. *Use of health care for illnesses and injuries that are partially psychogenic.*

The calculation is based on the percentage of the psychogenic components of medical problems that occur when specified stress/conflict takes place.

2. *Lowered job motivation.* The calculation is based on the loss of productivity due to the stress/conflict event.

3. *Lost work time.* The calculation is based on sick days, personal leave and lost time due to disciplinary actions taken during stress/conflict.

4. *Wasted time.* This occurs primarily through the loss of an administrator's time spent resolving stress/conflict.

5. *Reduced decision quality.* Administrators and work teams should ask, "What opportunities were lost by poor decisions that were affected by stress/conflict, and what might have been gained if a better decision had been made?"

6. *Loss of skilled employees.* Chronic unresolved stress/conflict can be a decisive factor in many of the voluntary employee departures.

7. *Restructuring.* The redesign of workflow may be altered in an attempt by administration to reduce the amount of interaction among employees.

8. *Sabotage, theft and damage.* The prevalence of employee stress/conflict and the amount of damage and theft of inventory and equipment are often related.

If the reader is interested in the complete instrument developed by Dr. Dana, it is available at no cost by visiting the Web Site: [www.mediationworks.com](http://www.mediationworks.com). One might shudder at the results, if one were to do a cost analysis of his/her work environment

using the instrument as an assessment tool.

**Being a Victim of Stress.** In an attempt to address the cost effects of stress in the workplace, how might each of us attempt to be proactive instead of reactive? How might we identify when a co-worker or we are manifesting signs of stress in the workplace? According to Dr. Paul Preston<sup>11)</sup>, the following symptoms indicate workplace stress and impending low morale:

1. Work efficiency declines markedly, as does general initiative and work interest.

2. Refusal to cooperate with others, citing dissatisfaction.

3. Negative behavior toward one's work group, entire organization or profession.

4. In conversation, depreciating one's profession or organization, coupled with attempts to portray one's personal contributions as unappreciated and unnoticed.

5. Markedly higher turnover and absenteeism than those not affected.

6. Blames scapegoats, such as bosses, politicians, and spouses. Even blames others for one's own errors and failures.

7. Disorientation and signs of mental or physical breakdown during crisis periods.

No doubt, all of us, or someone we know, has used some of these tactics. However, when assessing the presence of workplace stress one has to look at patterns of behavior for a period of time, not just one isolated incident.

### Stress Reduction Strategies

Stress in the workplace is here to stay. Data suggests, at this time, that health care is one of the most stressful work environments<sup>12-15)</sup>. Given this fact, what can be done to assist someone in coping with stressful situations in the workplace? The remainder of this article presents mechanisms that can be used to enhance the three components of psychological hardiness (commitment, control and challenge).

**Strategies for Building Commitment and Reducing Stress.** As previously presented, the commitment component of psychological hardiness is defined as a sense of purpose and meaning that is expressed by way of becoming involved in life's events rather than being passively involved. strategies that may assist in building the commitment component of an individual's psychological hardiness include:

1. Revise and rehearse what you would do the next time the specific stressful event happens. For example, go over in your mind how you could have handled the situation in a better, more refined way. This will help you practice how to actively become involved in the stressful event rather than passively retreating and trying to avoid the situation when it arises again. Stop and think, "How many times have you said to yourself, if I had to do it over I would have said it in this manner or I would have done it this way."
2. Express yourself directly to the involved person(s). For example, explain or repeat your feelings and the reasons that you have these feelings. Ask for explanations of the other person's feelings or interpretations as they relate to the specific situation.
3. Rework the situation in your mind. For example, think about what you would like to say to a particular physician, nurse or parent. Think about what could have happened and how you could have dealt with the situation in a better manner.

As one can see, these three strategies are very closely related and very similar in approach. However, they all assist in building one's sense of commitment

**Strategies for Building Control and Reducing Stress.** As previously discussed, the control component of psychological hardiness is the tendency for the individual to believe and to act in a way that influences life's events rather than feeling helpless when confronted with adversity. To build one's

control and reduce stress, the following strategies may prove to be helpful:

1. Seek more information about the situation. Information provides one with control of a situation. For example, read a book or article on the subject that is of concern. Consult the chart or pathology reports. Consult with a knowledgeable person.
2. Try to decrease the presence of stressful feelings For example, express feelings to an uninvolved person, such as an animal or inanimate object. Furiously clean house or wash the car. Many women do some type of housework when they are stressed. Also take part in physical exercise such as walking, running, swimming or biking.
3. Try to lighten or brighten the environment. For example, bring pictures to the office or workspace. Bring plants or flowers for everyone to enjoy. Bring food to share with others.
4. Search for a philosophical and/or spiritual meaning in the stressful experience. For example, ask yourself, "What meaning does this experience have in my life?" Increase, alter or involve yourself in spiritual beliefs and practices.

**Strategies for Building Challenge and Reducing Stress.** Challenge is the belief that change, instead of stability, is normal in life and that change is a stimulus to grow rather than a threat to security. To enhance one's challenge component of psychological hardiness, the following strategies may help:

1. Use interpersonal skills. For example, call in a higher authority. Learn how to phrase things delicately or to the other person's liking. Express yourself to another person whom you think can intervene more safely or effectively than you. Ascertain and build support for your position among your peers.
2. Look for ways to keep your perspective on the situation. For example,

identify successes no matter how small. Look for successes on a regular basis. One will find that successes outweigh failures!

3. Broaden the range of influence and concern beyond the specific work situation. For example, work within your specific environment to develop support systems for nurses and other health care providers. Join professional organizations and become actively involved in bringing about change for the profession.
4. Cultivate an objective, intellectual attitude. For example, emphasize what is realistic. View the circumstances as a learning experience.

The strategies that have been identified are by no means an exhaustive list of approaches to reducing stress in one's life or in the work place. However, they are strategies that may be helpful. Each individual needs to identify strategies that work best for him/her. As each individual approaches stress in the workplace, it behooves each of us to be committed to what we do, to take control of the circumstances, and to see each event as a challenge to overcome and achieve. By so doing, one can build his/her psychological hardiness and hopefully cope more effectively with a stressful event.

### Summary

The key components of psychological hardiness have been identified and described, manifestations of stress have been discussed, and strategies for reducing stress within the theoretical framework of psychological hardiness have been presented. Managing one's stress is truly a balancing act. However, with practice and planning one can learn to handle stressful situations by enhancing one's psychological hardiness.

### References

- 1) Lazarus, R., and Folkman, S. *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1984.
- 2) Lambert, C. and Lambert, V. Psychological hardiness: State of the science. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, **13**(3): 11-19, 1999.
- 3) Kobasa, S. Stressful life events, personality and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **37**: 1-11, 1979.
- 4) McCraine, E., Lambert, V. and Lambert, C. Work stress, hardiness and burnout among hospital staff nurses. *Nursing Research*, **36**(6): 374-381, 1987.
- 5) Kobasa, S., Maddi, S. and Courington, S. Personality and constitution as mediators in the stress-illness relationship. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, **22**: 368-378, 1981.
- 6) Miyata, M., Tanaka, Y. and Tuji, S. Occupational stress as a development factor of psychosomatic disease and psychiatric disorder. *Journal of UOEH (Japanese)*, **19** (4): 297- 305, 1997.
- 7) Oribe, H. Investigation of mental health of company workers in Japan. *Journal of Nara Medical Association*, **46** (5): 487-499, 1995.
- 8) Matsuda, M. and Kikuchi, H. Study of factors that influence stress and stress reaction in the workplace. *Psychosomatic Therapy (Japanese)*, **8** (1): 52-58, 1995.
- 9) Lambert, V. and Lambert C. Literature review of role stress/strain on nurses: An international perspective. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, **3**: 161-172, 2001.
- 10) Dana, D. *Conflict resolution: Tools for everyday work life*. New York: McGraw- Hill, 2001.
- 11) Preston, P. Stress management. *Administrative Radiology Journal*, **15** (8): 18-20, 24-27, 1996.
- 12) Doi, Y., Uehata, T., and Ishihara, N. Type-A female laborers in Japan: A point of view for Epidemiology. *Journal of Type-A Behavioral Patterns (Japanese)*, **11** (1): 25-31, 2000.
- 13) Lambert, C. and Lambert, V. Relationships among faculty practice involvement, perception of role stress, and psychological hardiness of nurse educators. *Journal of Nursing Education*, **32**: 171-179, 1993.

- 14) Tonori, H. and Aizawa, Y. Management of job stress in consideration of gender and age. *Journal of Occupational Health* (Japanese), **43** (6): 202-206, 2001.
- 15) Yamase, H. A psychological study about role stress of emergency nurses in Japan. *Japanese Journal of Emergency Nursing* (Japanese). **7** (2): 66-71, 1999.